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Thursday, 26 March 2015, 10.25 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Delattre	(France)
Members:	Angola	Mr. Gaspar Martins
	Chad	Mr. Cherif
	Chile	Mr. Barros Melet
	China	Mr. Wang Min
	Jordan	Mrs. Kawar
	Lithuania	Mr. Baublys
	Malaysia	Mrs. Adnin
	New Zealand	Mr. McLay
	Nigeria	Mr. Sarki
	Russian Federation	Mr. Safronkov
	Spain	Mr. González de Linares Palou
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Wilson
	United States of America	Mr. Pressman
	Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	Mr. Ramirez Carreño

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Robert Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

As this is Mr. Serry's last last briefing to the Council in his capacity as Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, I should like to take this opportunity to warmly thank him for his outstanding service. The Council extends its gratitude to him and wishes him every success in his future endeavours.

I now give the floor to Ms. Serry.

Mr. Serry (*spoke in French*): I warmly thank you, Mr. President, for your kinds words. The past seven years have been an extraordinary experience for me that will remain with me for the rest of my life. I humbly and gratefully acknowledge the unique opportunity afforded me.

(*spoke in English*)

I brief the Council today against the backdrop of another month plagued by the brutality that continues to cause immense human suffering across the region. As this will be my last briefing, I intend to focus on my own mandate, while of course recognizing that the Arab-Israeli conflict is affected by the dramatic events in the region.

In any peace agreement Israeli security concerns will need to be seriously addressed. However, losing sight of reaching peace between Israel, Palestine and the wider Arab world altogether — I have repeatedly warned the Council that we may be heading in that direction — would be tantamount to pouring more oil on the regional flames. Conversely, real progress in achieving a two-State solution and ending the longest occupation in modern history would go a long way towards improving regional security and strengthening moderate forces in the region. In that regard, the Arab Peace Initiative still holds out the prospect of Israel normalizing its relations with the Arab and wider Muslim world, rather than isolating itself.

Let me first briefly update the on significant events during this reporting, period before sharing some parting thoughts based on my seven years of experience, which the Council may wish to consider.

On 17 March, general elections were held in Israel. We congratulate Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Likud party on winning the highest number of seats, and note that President Rivlin has invited him to form the next Government, a process that may take several weeks. However, I am frankly concerned by many of the hard-line statements put forward in the final days of campaigning, in particular remarks by the Prime Minister raising serious doubts about Israel's commitment to the two-State solution. I urge the incoming Israeli Government to seize the opportunity of a fresh mandate to quickly demonstrate in words and, more importantly by actions, that commitment.

Earlier this month, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Central Council adopted a series of decisions, including "to suspend all forms of security coordination given Israel's systematic and ongoing noncompliance with its obligations under signed agreements." While noting that in three months' time the PLO Executive Committee will report back on the implementation of that decision, to date security coordination is continuing. That move may have far-reaching consequences and, along with the Palestinian accession to the International Criminal Court effective 1 April, it is yet another powerful sign of Palestinian determination not to return to the status quo.

We cannot run from reality. There is a genuine possibility that ending Palestinian security coordination with Israel may be the final nail in the coffin of the Oslo Accords. However, there is still time for parties to end the cycle of counterproductive action and counteraction.

With the third month of Israel's withholding of Palestinian tax revenues, now amounting to over $400 million, the Palestinian Authority's financial crisis is deepening. We are deeply concerned that, despite the announcement of an austerity budget for 2015, that temporary band-aid may not allow the Palestinian Authority to survive. Israel's action is in violation of the Paris Protocol of the Oslo Accords. We again call on Israel to immediately reverse its decision.

In Gaza, an equally destructive financial crisis, related to the lack of progress on civil service reform, continues to ratchet up tensions. It has been nearly five months since the United Nations facilitated a humanitarian payment to Gaza civil servants. I cannot help but feel that such a gesture may be needed yet again to sustain minimum conditions for stability until the parties have addressed the underlying issue.

In that regard, I welcome Prime Minister Hamdallah's second visit to Gaza this week and commend his continued efforts to find solutions for this and other critical issues, which will facilitate his Government's assumption of its rightful responsibility in Gaza. I also welcome last week's declaration of support by President Abbas and Hamas for the Swiss road map pertaining to the reintegration and reform of the public sector in Gaza. I would like to thank Switzerland for its committed efforts on that issue and urge the road map's swift implementation.

While the appalling situation in Gaza endures, there are some signs of progress. While not enough, the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism is making a difference. As of 23 March, almost 80 per cent of damaged shelters had been processed through the Mechanism, with over 61,000 individuals having procured construction materials to carry out their home repairs. In addition, the Mechanism is ready to process large-scale reconstruction. Over 40 international and private sector projects have been approved, and 5 are already under way — including Qatar's first major housing project to construct 1,000 housing units. I appreciate Israel's willingness to facilitate that process. I therefore encourage all international partners to take note that the Mechanism is working and to fully engage on Gaza reconstruction, in line with their pledges in Cairo last October.

The situation in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, remains tense. At practically every monthly briefing during the past seven years we have reported on negative developments. Those include the loss of lives and injuries resulting from demonstrations, inter-communal violence, often involving Israeli settlers, and Israeli search-and-arrest operations. We have also reported on security incidents, including, increasingly, so-called lone-wolf attacks. And the Secretary-General and I have firmly condemned acts of terror. I do not need to give the details to report that this month resembles the average from previous briefings, including on home demolitions — another disturbing trend. Numbers sometimes hide the grim reality of entrenched occupation leading to growing despair.

Neither did we fail to report to the Council more positive developments, in particular related to Palestinian State-building and the easing of Israeli restrictive measures. After a long-standing dispute, Rawabi has finally been connected to the water supply, thereby allowing families to begin moving into that modern Palestinian township near Ramallah. I also welcome recent Israeli steps to ease some of its restrictions on the movement of people and goods in the West Bank and Gaza. I only wish that I could have reported such positive news on a regular basis, and I urge Israel to expand upon those important initiatives.

Unsurprisingly, settlement planning and activity also continued this month, despite unanimous opposition from the international community. According to the Israeli non-governmental organization Peace Now, from January 2008 to January 2014 — or six of my seven years as Special Coordinator — the population in settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, steadily increased by an estimated 16 per cent to a total of 551,500 persons — over half a million people. Some 16,500 new residential units were constructed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem during that period.

Illegal settlement activity simply cannot be reconciled with the objective of a negotiated two-State solution, and may kill the very possibility of reaching peace on the paradigm of two States for two peoples. I frankly do not know if it is already too late. The minimum conditions of trust cannot be restored without the new Israeli Government taking credible steps to freeze settlement activity.

Allow me, in this final briefing, to share my parting thoughts.

Upon leaving this position, I cannot but express an overriding feeling that I have been part of a peace process in which a can is kicked down an endless road. During the past seven years, three United States-led peace initiatives remained inconclusive and did not bring us any closer to the urgently needed political foundation for a Palestinian State as part of a two-State solution. That is why the remarkable progress achieved in Palestinian State-building, pursued vigorously under the leadership of President Abbas and former Prime Minister Fayyad, has started to turn into a failed success. Moreover, all three stalled negotiations were

followed by wars in Gaza, leaving the Strip devastated seven months after the last war, as I observed during my last visit.

To seek to prevent yet another descent into conflict, I have publicly called for a new strategy prioritizing Gaza. By that, let me be clear: I do not mean "Gaza only." Neither I nor the United Nations would ever support a strategy that would seek to divide Gaza from the West Bank. Focusing support on Gaza must be inextricably linked to addressing the wider peace process.

Prioritizing Gaza means that we recognize that we cannot possibly hope to pick up the pieces of a shattered Israel-Palestinian peace strategy, leaving Gaza as it is. It means that we cannot possibly hope to again board the peace train in the West Bank and arrive in Gaza as a final stop. It means that we must fix Gaza — or at least stabilize it — so that we do not reconstruct it for a third time, only to see it destroyed again, and so that it does not halt peace efforts that aim to reach the long-desired two-State vision: Israel living side-by-side in peace and security with one single, unified State of Palestine. Prioritizing Gaza means for me achieving four main objectives urgently.

First, we need a more stable ceasefire under the umbrella of the Government of national consensus. I have called for a reconstruction *hudna*: a freeze of all military activities above and below ground over at least a three-to-five-year time frame. That would allow time and give donors confidence for the large-scale, accelerated reconstruction that Gaza desperately needs: major infrastructure projects, including housing; a gas pipeline, to generate inexpensive energy; and a desalination plant to address the chronic water shortages. Once those immediate needs are met, a next step would be to look into providing an opening to the world via a seaport.

Secondly, such a *hudna* can be sustainable only if Palestinians move towards real reconciliation. That has not happened yet. Clearly, it will not be an easy task. But what is the alternative? Empowering the Government of national consensus to take up its leadership role in Gaza is the only way forward. Bringing all the crossings in Gaza under the control of the consensus Government and reforming the civil service represent essential next steps.

Thirdly, all Gaza crossings need to be opened further to support the free movement of people and goods, including to reconnect the Strip and the West Bank and to enable exports.

And, fourthly, the international community must be prepared to fully support the Government of national consensus politically and financially. That includes acting on the commitments made at the Cairo Conference to support Gaza reconstruction. A new strategy for Gaza needs the engagement of all stakeholders. I very much hope that conditions will soon allow Egypt to continue playing its important role, including by resuming the stalled ceasefire talks and promoting Palestinian reconciliation.

I can honestly say that Gaza has consistently been a top priority for the United Nations, and for me personally. During each crisis, the United Nations, including through the personal involvement of the Secretary-General, was in the forefront to stop the fighting. Let me here also thank the United Nations family on the ground, particularly the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, for its indispensable role in picking up the pieces in the aftermath and for doing the important development and humanitarian work. The stark truth is that, despite all the efforts, Gaza is our collective failure and the people of Gaza continue to suffer the consequences.

Another lesson learned after seven years and three wars is that the Middle East peace process has mainly played out on three interconnected and mutually conflicting tracks: peace negotiations, Gaza, and the United Nations. The interplay of these three tracks has produced a dangerous outcome — I dare say the biggest crisis to date to our joint efforts to achieve a two-State solution. As I have noted in my briefings to the Council since May 2012, the parties are heading towards an outcome that I can only describe as a one-State reality.

As the parties do not appear at this point ready to recommence negotiations, we should not rush them back to the table. If indeed we believe that they do continue to seek an outcome of two neighbouring States living in peace and security, but are unable themselves at this juncture to agree on a meaningful framework to resume negotiations, the international community should seriously consider presenting such a framework for negotiations, including parameters, to achieve this. That may be the only way to preserve the goal of a two-State solution in the present circumstances.

Peace is first and foremost the responsibility of the parties to the conflict, but that reality cannot absolve international institutions of their responsibilities. For its part, the Quartet has largely failed to live up to expectations, although recent efforts to reinvigorate it, including through an enhanced role for regional stakeholders, may have a positive impact. It remains the primary responsibility of the Council to play its role in developing a new peace architecture for resolving the conflict at long last. Resolution 242 (1967), embodying the key principle of land for peace, is nearly half a century old. During my tenure — in my first year, actually — the Council adopted only two resolutions on Israel and Palestine, and neither of these provided a strategy. Has the time not come for the Council to lead?

In conclusion, let me express my appreciation for the dedicated work of the many staff members of the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, without whose efforts I could not have done my job. And further, I wish to convey my sincere gratitude to the Security Council and to the Secretary-General for all the support I have received over these eventful years. I could not have carried out my mission without their strong backing and, in particular, without their support for my maintaining contact — as the only peace envoy permanently on the ground — with all parties concerned, including, as appropriate, with non-State actors, such as Hamas. Goal-oriented contact with such interlocutors is an essential element for any envoy seeking peace in a complex, modern conflict.

Finally, to my successor, Nickolay Mladenov, I wish every success in dealing with this infinitely challenging environment.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Serry for his briefing, and reiterate our gratitude to him.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.45 a.m.